SPORT

Poland stun US to set up United Cup summit clash with Switzerland

SYDNEY: Poland exacted revenge for their loss to the United States in last year's final, beating the defending champions in their last-four tie at the United Cup to set up a title clash with Switzerland, who beat Belgium in their semi-final with Belinda Bencic playing a starring role on Saturday.

Hubert Hurkacz stunned world number nine Taylor Fritz in the men's singles to give Poland the lead, before Coco Gauff beat Iga Swiatek to level the tie. But Poland prevailed in the mixed doubles decider, where Katarzyna Kawa and Jan Zielinski beat Gauff and Christian Harrison.

Hurkacz, ranked 83rd in the world, avenged his loss to Fritz in last year's final in a 7-6 (7/1), 7-6 (7/2) win, after taking the lead in both tiebreaks with well-placed backhand passing shots to beat his second top-10 ranked opponent this week.

"Definitely pleasantly surprised... in seven months, [this is] my first tournament. So coming back from such a long period the first time in my life, you never know what to expect," said Hurkacz, who also beat world number three Alexander Zverev on Monday when he returned from an injury layoff.

World number four Gauff got the US back in the game, beating Swiatek 6-4, 6-2, as the American's powerful shots forced the world number two to stay near the baseline and make mistakes with her backhand returns.

It was Gauff's fourth consecutive victory over the world number two and a statement win with the Australian Open just over a week away.

Gauff, however, could not complete her team's comeback, as Kawa and Zielinski won 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/3) in the mixed doubles, ensuring Poland's progress to Sunday's final.

"I'm so proud of our team... I gave everything that I had. It means a lot, it's a great victory for us," Kawa said.

In the other last-four clash, Stan Wawrinka lost in three sets in gruelling heat of more than 40C but Switzerland beat Belgium 2-1.

The Tokyo Olympic champion Bencic had put Switzerland in front with a battling 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (7/0) victory over Elise Mertens in two hours and 37 minutes.

"It feels like 170 kilos fell off my shoulders -- I was so stressed, I really wanted to do well and today I felt so much pressure to not let my team down," Bencic said.

Then it was over to the 40-year-old Wawrinka, a three-time Grand Slam champion who was on Friday handed a wildcard to the Australian Open starting on January 18.

Wawrinka, playing his final year before retirement, fought back to force a deciding set against Zizou Bergs, but the Belgian ultimately won 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 6-3 in two-and-a-half hours.

That meant the semi-final went down to the mixed doubles, with Bencic and Jakub Paul defeating Bergs and Mertens 6-3, 0-6, 10-5 in another tight battle.

"The team spirit is amazing and it starts with the captain," Bencic said, referring to Wawrinka. "He's supporting all throughout my match and then he goes out to play his own match and then he's back to support the doubles. It starts with him but then with all the energy from our bench it gives us such a spirit to win." —Agencies

SYDNEY: Coco Gauff of the US celebrates after beating Poland's Iga Swiatek in their singles tie during the United Cup semi-final at the Ken Rosewall Arena on Saturday.—Reuters

Sabalenka returns to Brisbane final, faces Kostyuk for title

BRISBANE: Defending champion Aryna Sabalenka outclassed Karolina Muchova to seal a 6-3, 6-4 win at the Brisbane International on Saturday and reach the final of the Australian Open tune-up tournament for the third straight year.

In Sunday's title clash, the Belarusian will face Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk, who cruised past world number six Jessica Pegula 6-0, 6-3 for her third straight top-10 win after also defeating Amanda Anisimova and Mirra Andreeva in her last two rounds.

Former world number one Daniil Medvedev will take on unseeded American Brandon Nakashima in the men's final.

World number one Sabalenka has been in similarly superb form in her first tournament of the season, and arrived for her match against Muchova having defeated reigning Melbourne Park champion Madison Keys in straight sets in the quarter-finals.

See looked in great touch against the tricky Czech, who had won their last three meetings and went into the match as one of the few players with a winning record over the Belarusian.

But Sabalenka showed her class and power as she broke Muchova once in each set to take the semi-final in 89 minutes.

The 27-year-old Belarusian, aiming to win a third Australian Open in four years, said she could feel her level getting better with every match in Brisbane, where she is yet to drop a set.

She said that with seven of the world's top 10 having entered, it was ideal preparation for the Australian Open, which begins in Melbourne on January 18.

"I definitely feel that compared to the first match here, I'm playing better and better," she said. "That's really important heading to Melbourne, to build that level, and to play some great matches against great opponents. So I'm super happy with the performance so far and cannot wait to play my final match here."

Kostyuk, who entered the week ranked 26th in the world, swept past Pegula in just 55 minutes in a stunning display of power and aggression.

Kostyuk has never beaten Sabalenka in four previous meetings but said the pressure was all on her opponent.

"The pressure is not on me — I want to go out there and put on a good show for the crowd," she said. "I really have nothing to lose."

Three Americans were in action in the Brisbane men's event semi-finals, where Nakashima beat Aleksandar Kovacevic 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 before their compatriot Alex Michelsen went down 6-4, 6-2 to top seed Medvedev of Russia.

In the Auckland Classic, Filipina Alexandra Eala squandered a match point to allow China's Wang Xinyu to secure a 5-7, 7-5, 6-4 win. Up next for Wang is Elina Svitolina, who beat Iva Jovic 7-6 (7/5), 6-2 in the second semi-final.

Top seed Lorenzo Musetti reached the final of the Hong Kong Open, beating Andrey Rublev 6-7 (3/7), 7-5, 6-4 in a last-four clash. Alexander Bublik beat Marcos Giron 3-6, 6-4, 6-2 in the second semi-final, setting up a title clash with Musetti.—Agencies

FRANKFURT: Borussia Dortmund's Fabio Silva (L) and Robin Koch of Eintracht Frankfurt vie for the ball during their Bundesliga match.—AFP

Last-gasp Dortmund drop points at Frankfurt

FRANKFURT: Visitors Borussia Dortmund twice squandered a one-goal lead but struck deep in stoppage time through Carney Chukwuemeka to rescue a 3-3 draw at Eintracht Frankfurt on Friday as the Bundesliga resumed following a three-week winter break.

While heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures in other parts of the country forced the postponement of matches, Frankfurt and Dortmund provided quick-paced entertainment and late drama on a cold but snow-free evening.

Chukwuemeka's goal came minutes after Frankfurt had gone 3-2 up through Mo Dahoud, also in stoppage time.

Dortmund are in second place on 33 points, with leaders Bayern Munich, on 41, in action against VfL Wolfsburg on Sunday.

Dortmund's Maximilian Beier completed a quick break, tapping in Julian Ryerson's low cross for a 10th-minute lead with the visitors having enjoyed a strong start.

The hosts fought their way back into the game and levelled with a 22nd-minute penalty from Can Uzun, awarded for a clumsy challenge by Dortmund striker Serhou Guirassy in the box.

It was a similar story after the break with Dortmund taking control once more and going back in front in the 68th with Felix Nmecha's deflected low shot that went in off the post.

However, it only lasted for three minutes after Frankfurt caught the Dortmund defence napping and Younes Ebnoutalib slipped through to level with a powerful finish.

Dortmund hit the woodwork in stoppage time, before Dahoud curled the ball into the top corner to put Frankfurt in front. Yet hopes of a home win were dashed at the last minute as Chukwuemeka prodded home a late equaliser.—Agencies

Shehzad puts SNGPL in command

KARACHI: The third round of the President's Trophy Grade-I 2025-26 saw steady progress across four venues on Saturday, with Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL) building a strong position as pressure kept mounting on Sahir Associates.

At the State Bank Stadium, SNGPL asserted firm control over State Bank of Pakistan. After being bowled out for 263, SNGPL's pace attack dismantled the hosts.

Shehzad Gul claimed a maiden first-class five-wicket haul (5-37) and Shahnawaz Dahani took 4-23, skittling SBP for just 115 and securing a massive 148-run first-innings lead.

SBP's Rameez Aziz (43) and Mohammad Ghazi Ghori (33) offered brief resistance.

Their bowlers, led by Mohammad Abbas (2-11), fought back to reduce SNGPL to 23-3 in their second innings by stumps. Meanwhile, trouble deepened for Sahir Associates at the UBL Sports Complex.

Forced to follow-on after being dismissed for 103 in reply to Water and Power Development Authority's (Wapda) 323, they slumped to 94-5 in their second innings, still trailing by 126 runs.

The day's standout, Wapda pacer Mohammad Zeeshan, devastated the top order with a miserly spell of 4-18 in the second innings. Sahir Associates's captain, Asim Ali Nasir, top-scored with 58 in the first innings but it was not enough to avoid the follow-on.

In the first innings, Mohammad Adil took four wickets while Naqeebullah and Zeeshan claimed three wickets apiece.

Elsewhere, Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) gained the upper hand against Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) at the NBP Sports Complex.

A solid 162-run second-wicket partnership between Waqar Ahmed (81) and Saad Baig (80) powered KRL to 305-5 at close, giving them a lead of 61 runs. Imran Rafiq remained unbeaten on 54.

At the National Bank Stadium, defending champions Pakistan Television (PTV) found themselves under sustained pressure from Ghani Glass.

Trailing by 37 runs after the first innings, PTV stumbled to 68-5 in their second before a 65-run stand between Mohammad Suleman (45) and Arafat Minhas (34) offered resistance.

They finished the day at 153-7, with Amad Butt (13 not out) and Musa Khan (two not out) on the crease.

The Test bowling pair of Mir Hamza and captain Noman Ali kept Ghani Glass on top, claiming two wickets each.—Sports Reporter

Rain halts Pakistan U-19's warm-up but Ali provides spark

MASVINGO: A disciplined bowling display, led by Ali Raza's three-wicket haul, was the key takeaway for Pakistan as their first ICC Men's U-19 World Cup warm-up against Bangladesh at the Masvingo Sports Club in Zimbabwe was washed out on Saturday.

Putting Bangladesh in, Pakistan made early inroads. Ali struck twice in his first over, reducing Bangladesh to 10-2 and later returned to complete his haul as the opposition reached 152-7 in 36.3 overs before the weather had the final say.

The national U-19 side are riding a high momentum heading into the tournament, having defeated arch-rivals India to clinch the Asia Cup before claiming the tri-series title where they crushed hosts Zimbabwe in the final earlier this month.

Speaking post-match, Ali highlighted the positive foundation laid.

Despite the challenging stop-start conditions, he emphasised his adaptability and effort. Looking ahead to the tournament, Ali drew confidence from recent successes and the team's cohesion.

"We have won two tournaments recently. The entire team put in a lot of effort, everyone is confident and we will give our best in the World Cup."

The green shirts now travel to Bulawayo, where they face United States U-19 in their final warm-up on Tuesday before their Group 'C' opener against England in Harare on Jan 16.—Agencies

Barjees clinches U-21 national snooker title

KARACHI: Barjees Khan claimed the Under-21 title at the Junior National Snooker Championship in a tense 4-3 final victory over Punjab's Mohammad Farhan here at the Jahangir Khan Sports Complex on Saturday.

In a seesaw battle, Barjees, representing Islamabad, built a commanding 3-0 lead with frame scores of 63-10, 69-50 and 65-40 before Farhan mounted a stunning comeback to level the match at 3-3, winning frames 25-68, 65-36 and 32-66.

Barjees ultimately sealed the championship by taking a decisive seventh frame 62-45.

Earlier in the semi-finals on Saturday, Farhan — who recently won the U-17 title — had defeated Jahanzaib Jahangir of Balochistan 4-2, while Barjees overcame Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Shahzaib Rafique by the same margin.—Sports Reporter

Morocco show credentials in impressive performance to reach semis

RABAT: Morocco might finally have found their straps at the Africa Cup of Nations, advancing to the semi-finals for the first time in 22 years after a 2-0 win over Cameroon on Friday and beginning to look like real prospects for a first title in 50 years.

Coach Walid Regragui labelled it one of their best performances since the last World Cup in Qatar where they became the first African country to reach the last four.

Morocco were the hot favourites going into the Cup of Nations but did not impress in their opening matches at the tournament, looking nervy and under the weight of expectation on them as the host country.

But in Friday's quarter-final in Rabat they were bustling with intensity, aggressively pressing their opponent and continually winning possession and spending most of the match on the front foot, restricting Cameroon to only a handful of half chances.

"The first half was probably the best we've played since the World Cup," the coach said. "We quickly created opportunities; a lot of corners and our opening goal came from a set piece. Our win was deserved even though things evened out a bit in the second half."

Morocco were ahead as Ayoub El Kaabis header was brushed into the net off Brahim Diaz and they got a second goal in the 74th minute from Ismael Saibari.

It was a win furiously celebrated at the final whistle by the Morocco squad, showing their relief as they have felt a heavy burden of pressure since the tournament kicked off some three weeks ago.

Morocco have invested heavily in ensuring a showpiece tournament, putting their best foot forward ahead of their co-hosting of the 2030 World Cup with Portugal and Spain.

It is supposed to go hand in hand with success for their team, who have been top ranked in Africa for some four years but have a long history of failure at the Cup of Nations.

They have won the tournament only once previously, in 1976.

Regragui has consistently referred to Morocco's poor Cup of Nations record and warned both his players and the home support to temper expectation and show humility.

"We need to just keep going one game at a time. We have not done anything yet," he said after Friday's win took them to a semi-final against Algeria or Nigeria.

Morocco are through to the semi-finals of a Cup of Nations for the first time since 2004, when they lost the final to Tunisia with Regragui in the team.

"It is historic. Moroccans have not seen their team in the semi-finals of an AFCON for 22 years," the coach said. "They deserve it but we need to keep our feet on the ground and make it even more historic."

Five-time champions Cameroon go home but their coach David Pagou — only appointed in the run-up to the competition — expressed pride in his players.

"We are satisfied with the boys because they have given a lot of emotions to the Cameroonian people and that was the aim," he said.

"We wanted to go as far as possible but this is a team that is progressing and there are millions of Cameroonians who can be pleased. As a coach I will take away a lot of good things from this campaign."

SENEGAL ADVANCE

Senegal, the second-best African team in the world rankings behind Morocco, were seen as the biggest threat to the hosts before the tournament and they are also through to the semis.

The 2022 champions beat 10-man Mali 1-0 in a West African derby in Tangiers thanks to a first-half goal from Everton forward Iliman Ndiaye.

The goal came on 27 minutes and followed a blunder by Mali goalkeeper Djigui Diarra, who allowed Krepin Diatta's cross to slip under his body before Ndiaye struck the loose ball into the net.

Then, for the second successive knockout match, Mali were reduced to 10 men before half-time with captain Yves Bissouma shown a second yellow card for a foul on Idrissa Gana Gueye.

Diarra atoned for his first-half blunder by making several superb saves to keep Mali in the game, but one goal was enough for Senegal.

Seeking a third final appearance in four editions, the Lions of Teranga will face title-holders Ivory Coast or record seven-time winners Egypt in the semi-finals.

"It was not an easy match because we played against a very talented Mali team but we achieved our objective," said Senegal coach Pape Bouna Thiaw. "If we had been more clinical in front of goal we could have scored more goals but what is more important today is for us to have qualified for the semi-final."

His Mali counterpart Tom Saintfiet paid tribute to his side. "It was a difficult match for us because we had to play large parts of the game with 10 men. But that doesn't take away the fact that my players played gallantly and played very well," he said.—Agencies

TANGIERS: Senegal's Iliman Ndiaye (R) scores past Mali goalkeeper Djigui Diarra during the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final at the Grand Stadium.—AFP